



2013

# Agitprop

## *Part 7*

### Marches, Seminars, Public Meetings, and 'Soap Box' Oratory



No to Botha demonstration, London, 2 June 1987



**No to Botha demonstration, London, 2 June 1987**

## **Demonstrations and Marches**

The above image is of the Anti-Apartheid Movement's "No to Botha" demonstration on 2 June 1987, while British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was entertaining South African State President P W Botha. It was a large, impressive march, mobilised at short notice.

Demonstrations are Agitprop. They are works of art and they are designed. They are also the product of organisation, co-ordination and logistics.

The best way to get people to attend a demonstration is to get them involved in preparing for it.

Demonstrations are different in different places. The Anti-Apartheid Movement demonstrations had a particular look, to some extent because of the designer who was regularly used to create the posters, and who used very short slogans and large lettering, black on white.

Two posters were stapled to a stick about 1.5 metres in length, with two sheets of the grey cardboard called "chipboard" in between, to give stiffness, and all stitched together with more staples. This technique is still used in the U.K., but it is not used in South Africa.

Here, people hold up placards in front of them with two hands.

But what South Africans do, which British demonstrators hardly know how to do, is they dance, and they dance with marshals, who keep the front straight and maintain a slow pace by marking time at intervals.

South Africans also achieve a visual effect with clothing, such a T-shirts.

### **Organisation**

You have to get a permit to march. You get it from the police. That is the first thing.

Then, in South Africa, buses will usually have to be paid for and arranged in terms of where the pick-up points are to be. This is very expensive.

In South Africa, and elsewhere, there is nearly always a memorandum to be handed over at the destination.

The order of business is the assembly, where there may be speeches, the destination where there may be more speeches, then possibly a second destination and maybe a final rally in a park or square.

Often there is a truck that serves as a platform for speakers, equipped with a public address system.

Really big marches can close down a major city.

Marches are peaceful. They are not supposed to be violent or ugly in any way. If there are problems, it is usually because of “*Agents provocateurs*” – people who are not with the organisers, but are against them.

### **Mobilisation**

With marches, as with other events, the number of people reached by the advance publicity is exponentially larger in proportion to the time available for mobilisation. So, if in two weeks you can mobilise 50 000, then in three weeks you might be able to organise 100 000 and in four weeks, 250 000. These are imaginary figures, of course. The point is that the more time you give yourself, the more likely you are to get a big crowd.

So get an early start. When is the start? The starting point is really when the date, time and venue are fixed. After that you can communicate your event to the world, and especially to your potential supporters.

As was said above, the best way to get people involved is to give them work to do. So, you ask people to phone their friends until they have ten, or a hundred, known people who are committed to taking part in the march. You also ask people to bring a band of volunteers. You can make them your marshals. You will need hundreds of marshals for a big demo. If you have too many marshals, don't worry, there are plenty of other jobs to be done.

The mobilisation of volunteers is a chain reaction that will serve also to spread the news. How you get the mainstream media to cover it, is a mixture of the conventional (press release; press conference) and the original (cute slogans; cartoons; T-shirts; stunts). Sometimes, celebrity show-business support can help, but it can also limit.

As much as you can start the chain reaction of mobilisation in your own organisation, so also you would want other, supporting organisations to do the same thing. Each organisation is a means of mass communication in itself, and it needs to be used as such when a big demonstration is called for.

The art of unity-in-action comes into play at such times. It is possible to accommodate very many organisations in a big march, and you will want to do so. This means not being sectarian, but it also means preserving the basic slogans and purpose of the action. Meetings will be held. There may be a steering committee. Where there are press conferences, the different component organisations will want to have their say.

Usually, it is possible to defend the basic slogans but at the same time to allow organisations to express themselves by some variation in the banners and placards that they bring.

Means of general publicity will include posters in public places, provided that these go up some time in advance. Posters arriving the day before the event are a big waste of money.

The prior announcement of speakers expected at the event can be an important draw.

Each demonstration is a school of organisation for thousands of new recruits to this form of political expression and Agitprop.





**January 2013 ANC Rally**

## **Seminars, Public Meetings, Rallies and Conferences**

This item is about public gatherings initiated by your organisation. From the small to the large these are gatherings of people who are invited to attend, whether individually or by a general announcement.

For an additional text we will use the final parts of “Mr Chairman”, by Wal Hannington, a British communist, organiser and author. The book was first published in 1950. Although it is distant from us in place and time, yet it can help us to think about some of these things.

Let us look at how these things can be conceived in general, and then separately, and then with South African characteristics.

All of these events fall within what we are calling Agitprop. They are ways and means at different scales, and with some variation of form, for propagating ideas in a fuller and more detailed way, to larger numbers of people. Of course, they have a “message”, which is more or less pre-formed in the various different cases. Sometimes we are closer to “preaching” and sometimes purposefully “listening”.

## **Seminars**

Seminars are no different from what we do in the Communist University. A Seminar is an open-ended discussion where “no-one is right and no-one is wrong”, apart from the normal discipline of the chairperson, which rests in turn upon the self-discipline of the meeting.

In a seminar, the chairperson’s job is to protect speakers, to encourage as many as possible to speak, and to keep the meeting on-topic, but not to force any kind of conclusion.

In a seminar, the platform does not dominate and the initial speaker, who “opens the discussion”, should not use more than a quarter of the time, and preferably even less than that. Twenty minutes might be an ideal upper limit. A physical platform is not required in a seminar, and the best arrangement of seating is an oval or a circle, as in a boardroom or a council chamber. Seminars can be very small, but also can be quite large. A seminar of 100 or even 200 is not impossible. Time used in a seminar might be from one and a half hours to two and half hours from start to finish.

### **“Seminars” that are not seminars**

In South Africa, it is sometimes the case that organisations will hold a public event and call it a “seminar”, when it is not a seminar. This would usually be an event that has a prior intention of endorsing a certain outcome, and where there may be several speakers on a definite platform, speaking one after another and together using up most of the time. In these circumstances, if the chairperson is going to ask for contributions from the floor they can only in effect be questions of clarity, suggestions and very minor amendments to the matter being presented. The conclusion of such a meeting will be some kind of adoption of the position laid down by the speakers, which may have the form of document or declaration.

Such meetings take a very similar form to press conferences. They are more like Wal Hannington’s category 4, “For obtaining public opinion by resolution in support of a certain project”, or in other words, a “launch”.

### **Consultative meetings**

The SACP, when preparing a campaign, has quite often in the past held invited meetings that have mainly consisted of representatives of organisations that would have an interest in such a campaign. These meetings are not quite a public launch, and yet they are more driven and directed than a pure seminar would be. They are held so as to canvass opinion and to assist in drafting a campaigning platform that

will unite the broadest number of organisations and interests, after which the Party would run the campaign. In rare cases a special purpose vehicle or in other words a new mass movement might be set up, if such an organisation had a good chance of being sustained over time.

### **Public Meetings**

The term “Public Meeting” is on the face of it a general term, but it usually means the kind that Wal Hannington gives as his category 1, being “for demonstration and propaganda purposes only”. Such public meetings are used to spread a message, and to introduce personalities to the public. Public meetings are held at election times in South Africa, and also, for another example, by local police and other authorities when they want to address the population.

### **Mass Rallies**

Mass Rallies usually take place in stadiums. Typical in South Africa are the “Siyanqoba” Rallies that are held in all provinces at the end of the ANC’s election campaigns. Another example would be the January 2013 rally that was held in Durban to mark the end of the 100<sup>th</sup> Centenary year of the ANC (see the illustration above).

These rallies are Agitprop on a big scale. They involve huge organisation and mobilisation, very large numbers of buses, and sometimes overflow provisions in second stadia, with electronic relay using large screens. These are whole-day commitments by the masses who attend them. There is usually entertainment of a political kind as a warm-up, and everything is done to create a good atmosphere.

The main speaker will be a principle leader of the organisation, such as President Zuma, above, preceded by, in South Africa, leaders of the Alliance including the SACP, COSATU and SANCO, and the Leagues and MK veterans.

A good public address system is crucial.

### **Conferences**

Conferences are also covered in Wal Hannington’s book and we have included that part of the book in the attached discussion text. For our purposes, conferences may be taken as being of two kinds.

In the first place there are the constitutional conferences of organisations, including the SACP, ANC and COSATU-affiliated unions, held in conformity with their respective

constitutions and for the purpose of making decisions about policy and about leadership succession. Those conferences have their place within the field of Agitprop. Their results have to be widely pronounced and will constantly be referred to, afterwards.

There are also conferences that are convened by broad invitation. These ones are like seminars, but on a larger scale, and are perhaps spread over one or more whole days.

### **Logistics, organisation and finance for Rallies and Conferences**

We have looked briefly at Event Management in part 6 of the Induction course.

In both cases the date must be fixed far in advance. Finance must be arranged, and a venue selected. Especially in the case of rallies, the local authorities will have to be contacted early so that all the terms of compliance can be fulfilled in time for the event. These can be elaborate. The local authority will guide as to what will be required. In the case of conferences, the conference venue should have all of the compliance under control – but this is something that you need to check.

Accommodation and catering have to be laid on for everyone you are responsible for, and found available for all of the others.





**Speakers' Corner, Hyde Park, London, date unknown**

## **'Soap Box' Oratory**

There is a great tradition of open-air oratory in the working-class movement. Wal Hannington gives it a lot of attention under the heading “Street Corner Meeting”. Such open-air meetings can also take place at factory gates at suitable times.

This tradition can also be seen among the religious people and in the bible stories of the prophets and the New Testament stories of Johan the Baptist, Jesus and St Paul, for some examples.

Lenin, too was known to be an open-air speaker to impromptu crowds, and there are films of him doing so.

“Soap Box” oratory is a great way to learn how to communicate with the people *en masse* (“in their masses”). Speaking in public is an art, and like any other art it requires many hours of practice to make it approach anything like perfection.

This kind of interaction with people, including strangers, also breeds confidence in and love of the people. It is part of the “legalisation” of our organisations, including the communist party. Putting yourselves in front of the people and interacting with them means that they, too, can no longer regard you as strangers. Nor do they have to rely on the bourgeois mass media for news of you or an explanation of what you are.

## **Agitprop and Induction**

There is an overlap between Induction and Agitprop.

We have made two separate courses, with perhaps a tacit understanding that Induction is the internal business of our structures, while Agitprop is for consumption by people who are outside.

This is not the case. In fact, Agitprop is as much for “internal” consumption as it is for those who may not yet be organised, while Induction requires Agitprop. One can even say that Induction is a process of Agitprop with the end result being the generation of cadres of the Party and of the Movement.

The overlap between Agitprop and Induction is particularly apparent in this part of our Agitprop course. In the end, what we are learning in both cases is how to be cadres, or what are sometimes called “tribunes of the people”. It is about communicating.

## **Speakers' Corner**

The illustration shows the Speakers' Corner in London, which is an expanse of grass in Hyde Park near the Marble Arch, where all kinds of speakers gather at suitable times to address the passers-by. There is another place in London on Tower Hill where this tradition used to be carried on of open-air speaking.



**Course: Agitprop**

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2520 words